

Latoni tapped to head Scientific Review Branch

By Eddy Ball

NIEHS welcomed its new [Scientific Review Branch](#) (SRB) chief Nov. 18, as Alfonso Latoni, Ph.D., joined the leadership ranks of the Division of Extramural Research and Training (DERT).

Latoni leads a staff of five scientific review officers (SROs) and four extramural support assistants (ESAs). SRB is a kind of front door for aspiring NIEHS grantees, responsible for the initial scientific and technical merit review of grant applications and contract proposals submitted to NIH for funding.

Latoni and the review officers have a responsibility to the public and to the scientific community, for identifying the most meritorious scientific research to support, and to applicants, for giving every grant application and contract proposal an expert, objective, timely, and fair initial peer review. "We need to show the world that we have the best scientists," he said. "Our [review panel] rosters have to be top notch."

Not just more of the same

A native of Puerto Rico, Latoni received his undergraduate education from the University of Puerto Rico (UPR), and later went on to earn his Ph.D. from Boston College in sociology, with a focus on social economy and social policy. Prior to joining NIH in 2002, he was associate professor at the UPR Mayaguez, from 1986-2000, and director of the Minority Affairs Program at the American Sociological Association in Washington, D.C., from 2000-2002.

During his 11-year career at NIH in Bethesda, Md., Latoni served as an SRO at the National Institute on Aging (NIA), from 2002-2005, and at the Center for Scientific Review, from 2005-2008, before returning to NIA to serve as deputy chief of its Scientific Review Branch, from 2008-2013.

For Latoni, his new position is the natural next step in his career at NIH in scientific peer review. Although, in many ways, the policies and procedures are standardized, he was quick to add, "It's really not just more of the same."

Similar in size to NIEHS, NIA is also one of the biological process, rather than disease-specific or organ-specific institutes, and has a broad portfolio of grants. Still, NIEHS offers even greater challenges, with its more varied interdisciplinary portfolio. Grants at NIEHS deal with just about everything environmental, ranging from basic and clinical research, public health, and environmental justice, to disaster-response worker training, development of personal environmental monitors, and the design of technologies for remediating Superfund sites.

"This [topic range of grants] is new for me," he said. "I'm learning along with them [the SROs and ESAs]. My initial approach is to learn how each of them does the job, as well as to bring my experience, and to build, with them, an exceptional and unique review branch."

Life down south in the slow(er) lane

Latoni laughed, as he talked about his relocation from Bethesda to the N.C. Triangle area, and recalled an earlier discussion of colleges with his younger daughter, Angélica. When she told her parents she wanted to attend the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, he'd asked her, "Why would you want to go to North Carolina?"

Three years later, when Latoni accepted the position at NIEHS, his daughter, who is now at Elon University and has a keen sense of irony, turned the tables by asking him the same question. His answer won't surprise many transplants at NIEHS.

Latoni pointed to quality of life and family - and a three-hour commute each day from suburban Montgomery County, Md., into Bethesda that could easily become four hours if anything went wrong with traffic or the weather.



Latoni said his wife, Carmen, who is a financial person with an M.B.A., crunched the numbers during their search for a home near NIEHS. One of his daughters plans to continue her graduate work in early childhood and elementary education in N.C., while his other daughter, Elena, who lives in Puerto Rico, has done work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a scientist and soil conservationist. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



No one, except Latoni himself, was more excited by his appointment than DERT Deputy Director Pat Mastin, Ph.D., who served as acting chief following the retirement of former branch chief Terry Nesbitt, Ph.D. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

"I'm still trying to get over that commuting mindset," he said. "I've found myself arriving at meetings here half an hour early, because I'd become so used to getting a head start."

Now, Latoni is measuring his trips from a new home in nearby Cary, N.C., to NIEHS in terms of minutes, and spending the hours he would have wasted behind the wheel in Bethesda with his family instead. "I feel we can make a life here," he said. "There are so many good things happening to me now, and I look forward to our future here."

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